

Next Level Mittelstand

Digital offensive takes the next step into the future

The newly founded Next Level Mittelstand GmbH offers an open concept with digitalization offerings and cooperation opportunities. In early April, SCHUNK, ebm-papst, HEITEC, and Blockbrain have joined forces to lead the successfully established network into the future. Schwarz Digits also intends to become part of the network.

Medium-sized companies can accelerate their digitalization efforts by cooperating and sharing ideas, experiences and best practices. Henrik A. Schunk, Chairman of the Steering Committee of the Industry 4.0 Platform and Chairman of the Board of SCHUNK, launched the initiative "Next Level Mittelstand" (Next Level SMEs) in 2024 for this purpose. He explains: "We have found out that many smaller companies are still struggling with digitalization. The aim of the initiative is therefore to bring companies together to jointly develop practical strategies and solutions for expanding digital capabilities in SMEs."

From the SMEs. For the SMEs.

To expand the range of services for the successfully growing network in a scalable and future-proof way, SCHUNK, ebm-papst, HEITEC and Blockbrain founded the Next Level Mittelstand GmbH together in Heilbronn at the beginning of April 2025 - right in the heart of Europe's new AI hub. Schwarz Digits intends to become a shareholder of Next Level Mittelstand GmbH together with another entity from the Schwarz Group. The companies aim to contribute their expertise and resources from industry, process knowledge, and software to create an operational space for implementing and providing joint solution concepts. The founding of Next Level Mittelstand GmbH marks a crucial step towards advancing digitalization in SMEs and strengthening their competitiveness.

Digital sovereignty

"With this, we create the structure for an open SME ecosystem that can grow rapidly," explains Henrik A. Schunk. "We are pleased to have gained Schwarz Digits as a strong partner and shareholder for the initiative. This allows us to combine the interests of industrial companies with the dynamism and expertise of a leading digital provider. Being able to rely on a local partner is a significant strategic advantage given the current geopolitical situation – especially with regard to a sovereign and secure digital infrastructure." Bernd Wagner, Divisional Board Member Sales Schwarz Digits and CEO STACKIT, adds: "As a digital and infrastructure partner from Germany, it is a core concern for us to strengthen the digital sovereignty of SMEs. 'Next Level Mittelstand' brings exactly the right players together to drive practical digitalization forward – collaboratively, securely, and on equal footing."

Together towards “Digital Champions”

“Next Level Mittelstand” promotes the development of practical digitalization solutions as a central contact point. Through the platform, companies can exchange ideas, leverage synergies, and collaboratively develop and implement tailored strategies together with startups and IT experts. Participation pays off: The jointly developed results are evaluated and validated by “Next Level Mittelstand” and then made available to all members. This not only addresses the specific challenges of SMEs but also creates a digital foundation to participate in future joint industrial data spaces.

New members are warmly welcomed! In addition to companies, IT service providers, software developers, startups, and venture capital investors can also actively contribute

www.nextlevelmittelstand.com

Caption:



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(From left to right) Dr. Daniel Boese (ebm-papst), Dr. Eberhard Ritzhaupt-Kleissl (HEITEC), Bernd Wagner (Schwarz Digits), Henrik A. Schunk (SCHUNK) und Antonius Gress (Blockbrain)

Image source: SCHUNK SE & Co. KG

Statements of the founding members and Schwarz Digits:

SCHUNK SE & Co. KG

Henrik A. Schunk, Chairman of the Board

“With Next Level Mittelstand GmbH, we are creating an open SME ecosystem that can grow sustainably and support smaller companies in achieving digital excellence. The approach of acting as a joint venture and fostering close collaboration with our members from within a strong community leads to efficient and significantly faster digitalization successes. In doing so, we actively help to ensure that SMEs can connect to the networked data spaces of the future. This collective intelligence sends a strong signal for change and makes a decisive contribution to answering a key question for the future: How can we safeguard the digital sovereignty and competitiveness of the German and European SME sector?”

Schwarz Digits KG

Bernd Wagner, Divisional Board Member Sales Schwarz Digits and CEO STACKIT

“A special focus is placed on connecting medium-sized companies to foster cooperation and leverage synergies. In this way, we are building a broad SME network and strengthening Germany from the inside.”

ebm-papst Mulfingen GmbH & Co. KGaA & Co.KG

Dr. Daniel Boese, Executive Vice President Strategy, Global Product Management, Data & AI

“Digitalization can achieve great things! At ebm-papst, we are convinced of this — but also that the digital future can only be shaped together, in a way that is beneficial for both large and small companies. Digitalization in industry, with its complex supply chains, is only truly effective when everyone participates and data flows across the entire chain. With the ‘Next Level Mittelstand’ initiative, we are creating a platform that enables us to share innovations and learn from one another.”

HEITEC AG

Michael Frieß, CEO

“With NLM GmbH, we have created a space where concrete challenges of the SMEs are tackled and innovative solutions developed. Our focus is on ease of use and low entry barriers. This practical approach fosters cooperation and is highly pragmatic and effective.”

Blockbrain GmbH

Antonius Gress, Co-founder & CEO

“Digitalization and automation of knowledge is the last fully controllable lever of competition that enables SMEs to actively shape their future. With ‘Next Level Mittelstand’ we are creating the necessary structures and tools for this purpose.”

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